THE KEY BISCAYNE, FL PLAN FOR FIREFIGHTER RETENTION

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

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CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

Signed: _____

ABSTRACT

The problem was that Key Biscayne Fire Rescue Department (KBFR) appears to suffer from an unacceptable turnover rate of personnel. A significant number of personnel, after being hired by KBFR quickly leave to join other neighboring fire departments. This leaves KBFR in the position of constantly trying to train one or two new hires at a time. The purpose of this applied research project (ARP) was to examine the turnover rate for KBFR, identify the reasons for the rate being as high as it is and to establish a plan for reducing that rate. The historical research methodology was employed to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the turnover rate for KBFR as compared to departments of similar size?

2. What factors contribute to this turnover rate?

3. What plan(s) can be implemented to reduce the turnover rate?

A literature review was undertaken and a comprehensive analysis of the historical turnover rate of new recruits at KBFR from the period of 1993 to present. Research was also done in an attempt to gather the turnover rates from a number of surrounding departments. These were also compared to the national average. The second part of the research consisted of personal interviews from a variety of sources. The interviews were conducted with members of KBFR who have left the department in an effort to identify causal factors for their leaving.   Results from the first set of interviews showed that, surprisingly, money was not the primary motivating factor in leaving KBFR though it did have some influence.

Recommendations included the establishment of a formal KBFR recruit orientation program designed to better assimilate new hires into the KBFR Department. Research showed this to be an important and valuable tool in reducing employee turnover. The program to be designed must inculcate the new hire with a sense of belonging, purpose, and pride- all factors identified as critical to reducing employee turnover rates.

Additional recommendations included the establishment of a formalized exit interview program. Exit interviews were identified in the literature as an invaluable tool in identifying causes of employee turnover.

Further recommendations include continuous review of the compensation and benefits program offered by KBFR as it compares with the surrounding job market.

A final recommendation is that the fire service as a whole do a better job of tracking why it loses members to turnover, no matter how small this percentage might turn out to be. Additionally, this information should be accessible to the fire service.

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INTRODUCTION

The problem is that Key Biscayne Fire Rescue Department (KBFR) appears to suffer from an unacceptable turnover rate of personnel. A significant number of personnel, after being hired by KBFR quickly leave to join other neighboring fire departments. This leaves KBFR in the position of constantly trying to train one or two new hires at a time.

The purpose of this applied research project (ARP) is to examine the turnover rate for KBFR, identify the reasons for the rate being as high as it is and to establish a plan for reducing that rate.

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BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Village of Key Biscayne, Florida is a small tropical barrier island community located six miles off the coast of the City of Miami. The Village corporate limits is 1.3 square miles and has a population of approximately 10,507 full time residents inhabiting million dollar homes and high-rise condominiums that circle the island shoreline.

Fire rescue personnel perform a number of functions in addition to traditional fire suppression including: inspection and code enforcement, public education as well as

emergency medical services and special operations while on a 24-hour shift (Barron, Gilbert & Romero, 2001).

The all career Department consists of a Fire Chief, a Deputy Fire Chief, three staff Lieutenants – one is in charge of Inspections, another EMS, and the last one is responsible for Fire Training. The position of EMS Coordinator and Fire Training are new positions that were created in August 2003 and April 2004, respectively. The line personnel consist of one captain, one lieutenant, and 8 Firefighter/Paramedics per shift. KBFR operates on 3 platoons with a minimum staffing of seven to perform all the activities of a full-service fire rescue department, with an annual call volume averaging 2,500 per year.

The significance of this study is that the KBFR is currently undergoing a near constant cycle of replacing employees that have resigned after a short period of time, subsequently being hired by neighboring fire departments. Concurrent with this influx of new entries to the organization, is a lack of a cohesive employee orientation program designed to fully integrate those new entries effectively into the organizational culture. Reducing employee turnover rates has numerous values to the organization including, but not limited to, reduced expenditures, continuity of operations, and development of 'organizational memory' (Lowe, 2001).

Replacing employees is also an expensive process. In addition to the costs associated with attracting, testing, equipping, training, pension, medical screenings, and hiring new personnel, there are also significant costs involved with temporary staffing of vacant positions with personnel paid overtime rates. Additionally, new employees

necessarily start out with less experience in the system than the ones they are replacing.

This applied research project is related to the Executive Leadership course in that employee retention is an issue that must and indeed can only be addressed at the highest levels of the organization. There is no proof of leadership ability in running a department that lacks challengeable problems. The proof of leadership ability is in taking a department that faces a problem as severe as this one and taking those steps necessary to fix it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review was conducted to establish a base of information for the applied research project. This review started in the National Fire Academy's Learning Resource Center. Subsequent searches were conducted on the Internet and via inter-library loan. Departmental records were also analyzed for pertinent information as were reports and statistical data sheets.

The literature review yielded a wealth of information. Employee turnover is not a new phenomenon, though turnover on fire departments was not specifically studied. Employers have long struggled with turnover rates, with some private sector establishments doing extensive studies on the matter. Indeed, there is a whole industry devoted to studying, predicting, analyzing, and reducing the employee turnover rates found in the private sector.

Fire departments statistics were much harder to come by. Little was found in the literature review that specifically addressed the problem of fire department turnover on

career departments. Volumes could be found on the training and retention and turnover rates associated with volunteer departments. With the exception of a few papers that looked at particularly troubled career departments, those that were suffering from an exterior stressor that was well known, few could be found that addressed turnover rates on a stable, career department. From what the author could determine, this was mostly due to it being universally accepted that there was little problem with turnover on career fire departments. Source after source described the 'extremely low', 'little', or 'non-existent' turnover rates on their departments and stated that to be the accepted norm for career departments across the country. A Texas report put the national turnover rate at 4%. Specific troubled areas noted a turnover rate as high as 15% to 20% while agreeing that the national average was, by and large, much lower. The turnover rate for firefighters is about 1 percent (Sims, 2001).

Much of the private sector applicable literature addressed better employment screenings as being one of the keys to employee retention. Matching the worker to the workplace was believed to foster better employee expectations and more realistic expectations as to what the job and employer could offer the employee (Myers & Oetzel, 2002). It is without doubt that this is something the fire service as a whole manages to do quite well. People that are offered employment at a fire department generally do not leave the fire service (based on empirical data) though they quite often leave the department they were originally hired onto (Bavendam Research, 2000). The concept of trying to match employees to specific departments through better pre-employment screenings does have merit and implications for this research paper.

The literature review also emphasized the importance of having formal programs in place to address specific needs. Recruit orientation and new hire assimilation was not best left accomplished on an 'ad hoc' basis. Graham (2002) described the importance of having a 'system' in place to outline the steps necessary to perform a function. He claims:

"There are multiple ways to do any task, and some are better than others. But there is always a best way to do anything. …Good people still have got to be fully trained to perform every aspect of their rightful work" (p. 8).

Carter added, "We need to take a more standardized approach [to training]" (2001, p. 2). Training is a fundamental principle, firefighters not only want to learn, it is part of their expectation, and considering the impact of legislation and regulatory statues it is no longer an option, it is a commandment.

"…poor supervisory behavior was the main reason a person quit. The Hudson Institute's 2000 Global Employee Relationship Report states that the factors that have the highest influence on an employee's commitment to their workplace include satisfaction with day-to-day activities and care and concern for employees. …two of the top three reasons employees left their organizations were a perceived lack of recognition, and lack of career development" (Dobbs, 2001, p. 42-43).

There were several ideas in the body of literature reviewed that influenced the project. Much of the current body of literature on employee turnover, while directed mainly at the private sector, nonetheless has applicability to the fire service. Developing

realistic employee expectations that match the experiences likely to be encountered at *specific employers* was one. Another was the dearth of hard data regarding employee turnover as applied to the career fire service.

PROCEDURES

Definition of Terms

Attrition. "{The gradual reduction of the size of a workforce by not replacing personnel lost through retirement or resignation" (Encarta, 2004).

Turnover Rate. This is defined as the exit of an employee from the organization after having been hired and serving less than five years of duty. An exit after a term of service greater than five years is considered by the author to be a factor of 'attrition' rather than 'turnover'.

Recruit School. A formalized process of indoctrination and/or orientation into an organization.

System. "'A particular way of accomplishing something' and also 'a series of steps followed in a regular definite order'" (Graham, 2002, p.2).

Exit Interview. A formal process in which an employee that has just left the organization is queried as to the reasons for the departure.

Research Methodology

A comprehensive literature review was conducted at the campus of the National Fire Academy, Learning Resource Center (LRC) in Emmitsburg, Maryland and via interlibrary loan through the local library.

A primary source of research was the conducting of interviews, both internal and external. Internal interviews, while not truly being 'internal' in the sense of involving current employees of KBFR, were used to canvass information of those persons who at one time or another had employment with KBFR. Under another set of circumstances, these might accurately be called 'exit interviews' though for the purposes of this research project, they occurred much later than would be required for such a designation.

Internal interviews (Appendix A) were conducted to query the former employees as to the attitudes, conditions, and circumstances that caused them to leave KBFR. As a means of validation of those answers, the former members were also asked to expound upon what things were needed to have kept them as an employee of KBFR. The interviews were of a 'free form' nature, consisting of some set questions upon which the former employee was encouraged to expound. A minimum of follow up questioning was done in order to keep the format more or less consistent from person to person. Former employees were not given a hard and fast set of questions from which they needed to pick pre-determined answers. Though this certainly would have made for easier tabulation and provided an official sounding set of statistics, a non-limiting, free and full explanation of the circumstances for departure was felt by the author to be better suited and more important for the purposes of this research.

The 'external' interviews consisted of polling surrounding departmental staff officers (primarily Training Officers) to ascertain their experiences in dealing with employee turnover rates. They were basically asked the same questions as the former employees, estimating the importance of various factors as they related to employee

turnover. They were also the source of the turnover rates for the various surrounding departments.

Population:

The population for this research project was very tightly focused. It consisted of all former members of KBFR who were hired but voluntarily left after less than five years of service. Many of the former members were no longer reachable, having moved a great distance from the KBFR area. Attempts to contact former members were done via phone, e-mail, and in writing.   There were 14 persons who fell into the population category for the purposes of this research. A total of 5 people were successfully found who agreed to answer questions and engage in a discussion of the circumstances for their leaving. Their anonymity was assured as was the confidentiality of the information that they would supply.

Assumptions and limitations:

There were several assumptions and limitations inherent with this research project. The first assumption that was made was in deciding the definition of the population that identified 'turnover rate'. The scope of the paper was to examine the causes for what seemed like an inordinate number of new employees to leave the organization. Rather arbitrarily, the author established the guideline of using five years of service or less in the definition of 'turnover'. Certainly although a member who retires after twenty years of service could also be considered under the broadest of terms to be also included as 'turnover', intuitively it is highly doubtful that their reasons for leaving are going to be germane to the problem of understanding why new hires leave after just a short time with the organization. For the purposes of this research paper then, the

author assumes that those persons leaving the organization after five years of service or more are to be considered as leaving due to attrition. Empirically, the turnover rate for this group of employees is much lower and an in depth study of them falls outside the scope of this research.

The main limitation of this research project is the dependence upon data, in the form of the interviews with past members of KBFR, which has been distanced by the passage of up to several years of time. Recollections concerning the reasons for having left employment are not made more reliable with the passage of time. The best method of collection for this data would be in the form of exit interviews, but these have not been performed consistently and/or kept on file.

Further limitations include the relatively small data pool used for the purposes of this paper. The total population defined under the scope of this project was 14. Of the 14 potential returns, 7 (50%) were located. 5 of these 7 (71%) agreed to cooperate in this project and supplied useable data. While the number of respondents was relatively small, as a percentage of eligible population it was statistically significant. Further, for reasons beyond the authors' control, not all former members could be located.

Another limitation is the data needed to identify the relational casual factors specific to the Key Biscayne Fire Department. Applying comparative data from other fire service agencies is difficult to apply to this research project primarily due to the wide variance in department size, and the fact that the turn over rate for them is significantly lower and closer to the national average.

The final limitation is *time*. The six-month time limit imposed by the National Fire Academy as it relates to applied research did not allow for a more in-depth and

comprehensive literature review. Time constraints did not permit an even more extensive search for the elusive statistics on career fire fighter turnover rates, if indeed, they even exist.   It would also have taken significantly more time than was allotted to track down those former members of KBFR who have moved to locations far removed from KBFR.

RESULTS

Not surprisingly, the data obtained from the former members of KBFR matched closely the experiences described in the literature review. Most did not define money as the reason for leaving employment with KBFR. The uniformity of their replies was consistent with what would have been expected from a review of the existing literature on the problems of employee turnover.

Research Question 1: What is the turnover rate for KBFR as compared to departments of similar size?

The turnover rate for KBFR is quite high when compared to the turnover rates generally accepted as being the 'norm' for the fire service.

This rate of turnover for KBFR, measured as the ratio of the number of new employees that have left the organization after less than five years service against the total sworn strength, is 43.7%. This number was determined by examining the employee records and compiling a list of all employees who have left the service of KBFR. The start date was noted as was the date they left service. Persons who were terminated, retired, or departed after more than five years service was eliminated from consideration and potential contact by definition of 'turnover'.   With such a narrow

definition of who was to be considered as 'turnover', as opposed to 'attrition', there were 14 people who still met the qualification. The total sworn strength of KBFR is 32, yielding the percentage given above of nearly 44%.

By all accounts in the literature, and this is by no means a scientifically reliable number- one was not available, the turnover rate for the fire service at large is accepted as being within a range of 1% to 4% with some noted troubled areas having a rate as high as 15% to 20%. The turnover rate at KBFR then, is nearly double that of the highest rates found in the literature and *10 times greater* than the estimate given to the career fire service as a whole.

Research Question 2: What factors contribute to this turnover rate?

As was determined through the interviews, there were a variety of reasons that contributed to the turnover rate experienced at KBFR. Among the many reasons cited by former employees were; better pay found elsewhere, a more varied run load, better opportunities for advancement, better working conditions, and better benefits. Universally mentioned by the respondents was the need for promotional opportunity (5 out of 5). All thought that there would be a greater chance of advancement at KBFR than they did in fact encounter.

Secondary to the need for promotional opportunity was better pay and benefits (4 out of 5).

3 of the 5 responding also mentioned a more varied work load as a reason for leaving.

Research Question 3: What plan(s) can be implemented to reduce the turnover rate?

From the research, there are multiple plans that could be implemented in order to reduce the turnover rate at KBFR. Turnover of ***short-term*** employees is most commonly due to an unrealistic job preview during the hiring process (Bavendam Research, 2000). While unrealistic job expectations are not necessarily the fact in the fire service, unrealistic expectations of a particular employer certainly appear to be the case for a portion of the turnover rate at KBFR. Is the same type of firefighter going to be equally content at a department that has little opportunity for advancement and a low call volume versus a high call volume department with lots of opportunity for advancement? Instinctively, the answer would be 'no'. This was also supported by the returned responses with several members indicating that an opportunity for advancement might have been enough to keep them at KBFR. Keeping open room for advancement is not always possible or even feasible and generally lies outside the control of the fire department itself, residing with the authorizing governmental jurisdiction. In that respect, there is little that KBFR could do in respect to providing room for advancement. What does lie within the power of KBFR though is to better screen prospective employees regarding their job expectations in these matters against the reality at KBFR. As supported by the data from the disaffected employees and validated by copious instances in the literature, unrealistic job expectations do play a contributing role in the turnover rate at KBFR.

Another key plan that could be developed by KBFR to reduce employee turnover rates, and one that lies entirely within the control of the KBFR is the establishment of a

formal recruit school program. Also known as 'rookie orientation', 'probie school', and many other terms, a formal recruit orientation program addresses several of the issues identified as reasons for employee turnover rates in the existing literature.

DISCUSSION

Immediately obvious from the data is that KBFR does indeed have a problem with a high turnover rate. In a 32 member department, there have been 14 'new hires' needed in order to replace personnel that have left after only a short time of employment. This figure does not count those people who were fired, retired, or served longer than five years before leaving as these employees were outside the definition of 'turnover' as determined by the author. Including them in the study would boost the number to 32 -- equivalent to replacing the entire department in a period of only slightly greater than ten years. While there certainly is some ambiguity in measuring the turnover rate in this fashion -- on a five member crew, does replacing one of them twice account to 20% turnover? There is little doubt that a steady stream of 'fresh faces' can be found at KBFR. As compared to the available literature, such a turnover rate is quite abnormal. As cited previously, depending on the source, career fire service turnover rates are usually given as between 1% and 4%, where such numbers were found. Elsewhere, they are usually given as 'low', or 'non-existent'.

A high turnover rate is a problem for the effective and efficient operating of KBFR. There is no systematic program for including these new hires into the departmental culture beyond assigning them to the apparatus and expecting that they'll 'catch on' through orientation with a commanding officer. High turnover rates do not allow for continuity in the operations of most any endeavor. There are numerous costs

associated with replacing departed employees, both direct and indirect. It is also with a certainty that the organization will be replacing the departed employee with someone who is not as familiar with the organization. This cost connected with a high employee turnover was noted in Mullen's applied research as well, he emphasize:

"Considering the costs associated recruitment, screening, selection, and initial training, new employees represent a significant financial investment by the organization. The loyalty and commitment of new employees to the organization depends on successful assimilation" (Mullen, 2001).

The reasons for the turnover were quite in keeping with those reasons given by others in the field; both the few in the fire service that have also studied this problem, and the private sector as a whole. Rarely was the cause of turnover limited only to a monetary concern (Bavendam, 2000). Most gave multiple reasons for their leaving, with pay being secondary. The cause most often cited was a lack of upward mobility and opportunity. The opportunity for advancement at KBFR did not match the employee's expectations prior to hiring. Unrealistic employee expectations were cited numerous times in the body of available literature as the most common reason for early employee departures.

It is recognized that KBFR cannot internally address fully the issues of promotional opportunity. Such restraints are imposed by circumstances beyond the direct control of the KBFR, most often from above by the governmental unit having jurisdiction under budgetary constraints.

Also universally cited by the respondents, was the sense of regret they felt in leaving the organization. Those that stated they had the toughest time leaving been the ones that also held the strongest emotional connection to the organization. As noted in the literature review, employee commitment to the organization is a significant factor in retaining key employees. Successfully developing employee loyalty and creating a sense of belonging would then have an impact on turnover rates, according to most experts in the field. An organized recruit training program would seem to be the most logical tool for developing employee loyalty. Sending KBFR recruits through orientation programs at other departments might be a fiscal and logistical necessity, but failing to follow that program up with a KBFR program designed to assimilate the new hire into KBFR, would seem to be a shortcoming.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This researcher makes three recommendations; a pre-employment measure, and a post employment measure. The bulk of the recommendations will address the latter. There is also the need for further research into the problem of employee turnover in the fire service, and specifically that at KBFR.

As discovered in the literature review, un-realistic employee expectations are the most common cause of employee turnover. As one of the key pre-employment measures, KBFR should screen prospective candidates for their suitability into an organization that will have little opportunity for career advancement in the short term. Psychological expertise in this area -- the prospective screening of potential employees for a number of specific job related traits and leanings, is available in the private sector and should be utilized by KBFR. Matching prospective employees to specific job

functions was cited multiple times in the literature as an important consideration to reducing employee turnover. KBFR needs must be certain that candidates for employment have a clear understanding that promotional opportunity will be a long time coming and be content with that fact before accepting assignment.

A post-employment recommendation to reduce employee turnover rates is the establishment of a formal recruit school program. A recruit orientation program addresses several of the issues identified as reasons for employee turnover rates in the existing literature including addressing un-realistic employee expectations, imbuing a sense of organizational culture, developing beneficial relationships, and developing the skills needed to successfully assimilate into the KBFR. Mullen's research supported this concept and he commented:

"New employees, especially those at entry-level positions represent the raw materials of organizational staffing. Their initial experiences with the organization, indeed their first impressions, may have a strong impact on their perceptions, productivity, and their propensity to remain to stay with the firm. Administrative staffs must decide whether to accept by default a Darwinian type of employee development process where new hires blaze their own trail to acceptance and competence or to manage a structured program of orientation and instruction to promote organizational goals and employee potential. New employee development, successfully done, serves as the most basic cornerstone of long-term succession planning by building organizational capability through competent performance" (2001, p.1).

The third and final recommendation is that further research be conducted. As preparatory to that, KBFR should establish a formal program of exit interviews, keep and maintain the data collected in these interviews, and subject it to periodic review for trends and patterns that might warrant pro-active action.

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APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Please state the length of time of your employment at KBFR:

2. Did you undergo a rookie orientation program?
   - A. Yes, City of Miami Training Center
   - B. Yes, KBFR Probationary Manual
   - C. No, On the job learning
   - D. Other: _____

3. Would you say that your orientation program helped you assimilate into the KBFR – and possibly made you a better employee as a result? Please elaborate on your response.

4. Please identify the factor(s) that most entered into your decision to leave KBFR:
   - A. Better pay and benefits.
   - B. More chance for advancement.
   - C. Better working conditions.
   - D. Increased run load elsewhere.
   - E. Lost interest in KBFR.
   - F. Other- please describe.

5. Please identify some conditions that would have kept you employed at KBFR.

6. Did you feel a sense of 'belonging' while at KBFR? Please elaborate on your answer.

7. Is a sense of belonging and/or corporate loyalty an important consideration?